

## **Julie Lathrop**

Josh Wiggins  
Oregon High School, Oregon  
Teacher: Sara Werckle

It was June 29, 1958, in Rockford, Illinois when William, a Republican politician who had served in the state legislature, and his wife Sarah, Adeline, Lathrop, an active abolitionist and suffragette, gave birth to the first of five children. The child was Julia Clifford Lathrop. She went on to accomplish many things in her life, such as being appointed to the Illinois Board of Charities, creating the first juvenile court of the United States, as well as becoming a leader on the Children's Bureau in the Department of Commerce and Labor.

Lathrop attended the Rockford Female Seminary in 1876-1877, following in the footsteps of her mother who was a graduate in the school's first year. It was after her attendance at Rockford College that Julie Lathrop entered Vassar, graduating in the class of 1880. While at Vassar she studied various subjects including statistics, institutional history, sociology, and community organization. Lathrop's interest in multidisciplinary studies would eventually lead to her part in helping to create the School of Euthenics at Vassar with trustees Minnie Cumnock Blodgett and Ellen Swallow Richards. Lathrop's next career move was helped greatly by her father William Lathrop. He was quite active in politics as well as a friend of President Lincoln. It was through his connections and interest in politics that he drafted the first bill that allowed women to practice law. After her graduation, Julia Lathrop went to work at her father's firm as his personal secretary and law assistant to learn about the workings of law.

In 1890, Lathrop moved to a very impoverished section of Chicago. This move

was spurred by the visit of Ellen Gates Starr and Jane Addams to Rockford Seminary. They came to their alma mater to promote the idea of the Hull House. It was to be a settlement home to the students and members of the community. During Lathrop's stay at the Hull House, she founded the Hull House Plato Group. It was comprised mainly of older men who debated philosophical and religious matters. Lathrop also took an extensive survey to bring about the truth of how bleak the living conditions were in the area. To publicize her findings, she wrote the "Hull House Maps and Papers." Governor Altgeld appointed her to the Illinois Board of Charities in 1892 in recognition of her work. Her accomplishments while serving on Board of Charities include visiting all of Illinois 102 poor houses, as well as, creating the United States first juvenile court, located in Chicago in 1899. The protection of juveniles from being tried in an adult court was a great concern of Lathrop's. She stated "the growing child must not be treated by those rigid rules of criminal procedure which confessedly fail to prevent offenses on the part of adults or cure adult offenders." Lathrop also became a trustee of the Immigrants' Protection League, an active member of the Chicago Women's Club, and a member of the National League of Women Voters.

Julie Lathrop ended her 22 year stay at the Hull House with a move to Washington, D. C. where she was appointed chief of the newly created Children's Bureau by President Taft in 1912. Lathrop cared deeply for the welfare of children. On November 15, 1915, while debating whether the death of a mentally defective baby was just or not, she said, "It seems almost unspeakable that a mother should desire the death of a child even if it be helplessly defective." This made Lathrop the first female bureau chief in the history of the United States. Her newly appointed position did not come

without risk. Cecillia Tichi states, “If she failed, her name would be synonymous with governmental waste and female incompetence.” During her 10-year term Lathrop put a very high importance on issues such as child labor laws and juvenile delinquency. Lathrop also served a one-year term, which lasted from 1818 to 1819, as President of the National Conference for Social Work.

Lathrop’s work in public affairs was not limited to America. She became active internationally in 1918 when President Wilson sent her and a fellow social worker, Grace Abbott, to an international conference on child welfare in Europe. It was there Lathrop played a key role in the formation of a new childcare bureau of Czechoslovakia. She traveled back to Europe in 1925 on behalf of the League of National Childcare Commissions to battle against the capital punishment of juveniles.

It is plain to see that Julia Lathrop was a truly amazing woman. She accomplished so much in the pursuit of helping not only women and children but factory workers, the elderly, the impoverished, and the mentally ill as well. No matter where her passion for charity led her, she always came back to her birthplace of Rockford, Illinois. Her life, sadly, came to an end there in 1932. [From “Heroes for a Culture of Peace.” [www.peacekids.net](http://www.peacekids.net/heroes/pagesw-1/lathrop-quotes.htm), Julia Lathrop, <http://www.peacekids.net/heroes/pagesw-1/lathrop-quotes.htm>. (Oct. 16, 2008); “Julia Lathrop.” [www.webster.edu](http://www.webster.edu/~woolfm/lathrop.html), <http://www.webster.edu/~woolfm/lathrop.html>. (Oct. 1, 2008); “Julia Lathrop.” <http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu>. [http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/index.php/Julia\\_Lathrop](http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/index.php/Julia_Lathrop). (Oct. 1, 2008); “Julia Lathrop Fights Decision on Baby’s Death.” [www.disabilitymuseum.org](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org). Disability History Museum, <http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/lib/docs/1229.htm>. (Oct. 16, 2008; and Cecilia Tichi. “Justice, Not Pity: Julia Lathrop, First Chief of the U. S. Children’s Bureau.” [www.libraryofcongress.edu](http://www.libraryofcongress.edu), 2007, <http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2007/07-122.html>. (Oct. 16, 2008).]